



# Debbie Regala

State Senator

27TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

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## COMMITTEES:

Children & Family  
Services & Corrections  
  
Natural Resources,  
Energy & Water  
  
Ways & Means

## OTHER APPOINTMENTS:

Legislative Ethics Board  
  
Joint Legislative Audit  
& Review Committee

Dear Neighbor:

Greetings from Olympia. The legislative session is underway and our work is definitely cut out for us this year.

As you likely know, we are facing a \$2.4 billion budget deficit. How we solve this problem will have significant and long-lasting effects on our economy and our communities. I believe we are at a turning point in our state's history. We must take this opportunity to create a vision for Washington's future. This is a task I take very seriously.

Although Democrats no longer hold a majority in the Senate, as a member of the Senate Ways & Means Committee, I intend to remain very involved in crafting our state budget. I'll also be paying close attention to human service issues and our environment while I serve on the Senate's Children & Family Services & Corrections Committee and the Natural Resources, Energy & Water Committee.

Inside this newsletter you'll find a little more detail about our budget challenge, information about performance audits of state government, a brief discussion about the recently completed tax structure study, and a few words about a task force I've been working with to identify long-term funding solutions for our state parks.

I'd like to extend a warm welcome to those of you who are new to the 27th District. Please don't hesitate to contact me with your concerns and ideas during the legislative session and throughout the year. I rely on all my constituents to keep me informed about your priorities so that I can represent you well in Olympia. It is an honor and a pleasure to serve as your state senator.

Respectfully,

Debbie Regala  
State Senator  
27th Legislative District

# Budget challenge brings Washington to a crossroads



AS YOU KNOW, the state is grappling with a \$2.4 billion budget deficit. The governor's budget proposal includes no tax increases and makes drastic cuts to education, medical care for the poor and a number of social services for vulnerable people in our communities, among other things.

I am especially concerned about proposed cuts to:

- basic health care services for tens of thousands of people who need it;
- our public schools, and programs that reduce truancy;
- sheltered work settings for people with developmental disabilities;
- community supervision for thousands of low-risk offenders;
- the Readiness to Learn program, which links education and human services providers to help ensure that children come to school ready to learn; and
- the Long-term Care Ombudsman—an essential service that helps protect our elderly and give them the care and respect they deserve.

**We must do better.**

We are at a crossroads. As we look to mend our state budget, we must ask ourselves: What kind of Washington do we want? I believe most of us want

Washington to be a place where struggling children can get extra help in school; where the elderly and the disabled can get in-home care; and where those living in poverty or with mental illness can get food, shelter and medical assistance. And we want our communities to be safe and desirable places to live.

**“What kind of Washington do we want?”**

I also know our citizens want us to be as efficient and effective as possible with tax dollars. I agree and I'm analyzing each budget proposal for both short-term and long-term outcomes as well as efficient use of funds.

Many of you have sent me suggestions for repairing the budget. I appreciate hearing your ideas. One proposal is to “cut the frills” from our prisons. Another is to freeze salaries for all state elected officials. Both of these solutions sound great, but there's more to it than meets the eye.

Our state prisons are already pretty spare in what they provide offenders. During the past several years, the Department of Corrections has stopped paying for many programs and services. For example, inmates have to pay their own way if they choose to continue their schooling beyond adult basic education and vocational training. They must pay fees for recreational programs such as weightlifting and music. They even foot the bill for TVs, personal hygiene supplies and elective health care. And I think this is fine. The point is, there aren't many savings to be found in our criminal justice system that don't involve early release of inmates.

I'm supportive of freezing the salaries of state elected officials—legislators, the governor, the attorney general, the secretary of state, etc. But altogether that will only save about \$762,000 per biennium. To close our budget gap, we'll need 3,150 additional similar savings ideas. They'll be hard to find.

So, I'll also be listening to ideas for raising revenues. I can't see how we can maintain vital state programs and services without a way to pay for them.

# Audits of state government nothing new

LIKE MANY PEOPLE throughout our state, you are likely concerned about how your tax dollars are spent—and rightfully so. We all have a stake in knowing that our government is efficient and effective.

Performance audits have been thought of as the silver bullet that will ensure government accountability for its use of public funds. But most people don't know that Washington has an entire legislative committee dedicated to performance audits—as well as program evaluations, sunset reviews and other policy and fiscal studies.

Since 1973, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) has been looking at how state agencies operate, how they use public resources and what kind of results we get from these resources.

JLARC is composed of eight senators and eight representatives—equal numbers from both political parties. It operates year-round with highly qualified, professional, non-partisan staff who critically examine policy issues and state programs that our committee reviews. I have served on this bipartisan, bicameral committee since 1995.

JLARC has substantially improved the operations and performance of state agencies. For example:

- More than \$350 million in cost savings have been achieved since 1990 by implementing recommendations from JLARC's performance audits, sunset reviews, program evaluations and special studies.
- Both state agencies and the Legislature implement these

recommendations, and JLARC follows up to help ensure that the recommendations are carried out and that necessary changes are made.

- The quality of JLARC's work has received many awards from the National Conference of State Legislatures, a bipartisan organization that serves lawmakers and legislative staff nationwide. Our peers have found JLARC's work to be not only objective and independent, but also hard-hitting and critical of the status quo. We are proud of this reputation!

You can find out more about what we do—and have done—by visiting JLARC's Web site at <http://jlarc.leg.wa.gov> on the Internet.

## Task force seeks funding for parks and outdoor recreation

IF YOU VISITED a state park recently, you will have noticed at least one change: A \$5 per day parking fee is now being charged. This new cost, which went into effect Jan. 1, is but one indication of the financial distress our state parks are in today.

Recognizing the overwhelming needs of our state parks and recreational lands, the Legislature last year created the State Parks & Outdoor Recreation Funding Task Force, of which I was a member. Comprised of representatives from state and local governments and nonprofit groups, the task force's job was to recommend how to improve state parks and outdoor recreation programs, and to explore long-term funding options.

Here are some of the ideas we came up with:

- Create a single parking pass that could be used at all state recreational lands. Estimated revenue: Between \$2.5 and \$10 million per year
- Allow counties to collect more property-tax funds for conservation. Estimated revenue: \$18 million
- Extend the annual ½ percent excise tax on boats to include travel trailers and motor homes (as recommended by the Washington State Tax Structure Study). Dedicate the proceeds to state parks and outdoor recreation facilities. Estimated revenue: \$16.8 million

- Allow State Parks to use more of its budget for maintenance and less for land acquisition.

The task force worked in a very short time frame (only nine months) and has asked the Legislature to re-authorize its work for an additional year.

I believe our parks and recreational lands should remain open and accessible to the public. But I also know all too well the costs of keeping these beautiful lands safe and comfortable for visitors. We made some headway with this dilemma last year—I look forward to continuing my work on the task force this year.

For more information, please visit <http://www.leg.wa.gov/senate/scs/sporf/default.htm> on the Internet.



## Tax structure study offers alternatives

THE WASHINGTON STATE TAX Structure Study was created by the Legislature two years ago to determine how well our state's tax system functions and how it might be improved.

Last November we heard the results: our tax system is regressive. Low- and middle-income families pay a higher percentage of taxes than do upper-income households. Some businesses also are unfairly taxed.

"Our tax structure, which was put in place in 1935, might have worked well for a mid-20th century economy, but it doesn't work well today," the report states. This conclusion was reinforced by a year-long study conducted by Governing Magazine.

So, what do we to do? The study recommends several alternatives to the current system—**all of which would raise the same amount of revenue as the current tax system does.**

I favor reform of our tax structure. The current system isn't working. We need more balance and predictability, both for citizens and for our state's revenue stream. While tax reform won't solve our immediate budget problems, it can help prevent future fiscal crises.

For more information about the Washington State Tax Structure Study, visit [www.dor.wa.gov](http://www.dor.wa.gov) on the Internet and click on the "Washington State Tax Structure Study" icon.

## Town Hall meetings offer chance to help shape budget

THE STATE BUDGET is the ultimate public policy document of the state. When well crafted, the budget reflects the vision of what we believe is important for our communities. Please take this opportunity to offer your input about the budget-writing process by joining me and Reps. Dennis Flannigan, D-Tacoma, and Jeannie Darneille, D-Tacoma, for one of the following 27th District Town Hall meetings:

11 a.m. - 1 p.m.  
Saturday, March 22  
Colored Women's Club  
2316 S. Yakima Ave.  
Tacoma

2 - 4 p.m.  
Saturday, March 22  
Kobetich Library  
212 Browns Point Blvd.  
Tacoma

7 - 8:45 p.m.  
Thursday, March 27  
Anna Lemon Wheelock Library  
3722 N. 26th St.  
Tacoma

**We look forward to seeing you there!**

For more information, please call (360) 786-7652 or (800) 652-6000. For TYY, call (800) 635-9993.

**Senator Debbie Regala**

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